

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 434

UD 028 171

AUTHOR Burns, John
TITLE On William Julius Wilson's "Truly Disadvantaged."
PUB DATE 16 Nov 90
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Anaheim, CA, November 16, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Book/Product Reviews (072)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Affirmative Action; Blacks; Black Stereotypes; *Economically Disadvantaged; *Equal Opportunities (Jobs); Public Policy; *Racial Attitudes; *Racial Bias; Racial Discrimination; *Work Ethic
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans

ABSTRACT

A premise of this paper is that in his book "The Truly Disadvantaged" (1987), William Julius Wilson fails to recognize the effect of covert racism on the plight of the African American underclass. Wilson asserts that historical racism has contributed to the present predicament of the underclass, who have been abandoned in the ghettos by their black middle-class counterparts and by the working class. However, he also asserts that contemporary racism is no longer a major factor contributing to that predicament and that affirmative action policies have been counterproductive. He proposes a policy that would promote economic growth and sustained full employment that would benefit the underclass disproportionately. The counter-opinion is offered that while overt racism may be a thing of the past, a new breed of "symbolic racists" has evolved whose unspoken adherence to the Protestant work ethic offers a convenient moral foil to affirmative action and other social policies promoting equity. This invisible moral stance leads to a perception that racial minorities have received more than their share of social opportunity; hence reasonable access to opportunity is equated with favoritism and handouts, and racism is rationalized by wrapping it in the moral values of American secular faith. The paper concludes that it is important for students to understand why Wilson calls for an economic solution to social problems and important also to understand the nature of the challenges to that position, but that enabling students to examine the nature of the process by which people construct and attach value to the social experience and exercise control over that experience is not only important but essential. A seven-item bibliography is appended. (FMW)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED 385434

ON WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON'S

TRULY DISADVANTAGED

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

by John W. Burns
Professor of Education
Hobart & William Smith Colleges
Geneva, New York

Presented at the College and University Faculty Assembly Meeting,
National Council for the Social Studies Annual Meeting, Anaheim,
California, November 16, 1990

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Burns
Hobart & W. Smith Col.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

TR10179034 UD 028171

It was about a year ago when I read an essay in which a senior editor of Time praised the African American civil war soldiers depicted in the film Glory. He applauded them because they expected no quarter; what they achieved was through sheer individual effort and personal sacrifice in the face of adversity. The reference troubled me, not because of what it said, but because of the alternative it suggested. That implication is insidious. It masks a disposition that is socially destructive; i.e., that racial minorities are getting special treatment that they do not deserve. When I read William Julius Wilson's Truly Disadvantaged¹ I find an argument that might be seen as a manifestation of that disposition.

There are two things that I like very much about Wilson's work. First, his reservoir of social knowledge is considerable. Although he is reluctant to acknowledge it, he lays out the dimensions of the social problem in the United States that will not go away--it has dominated the past two centuries and there is no indication that it is likely to disappear in the next one. It is a problem that troubles even those who consciously contribute to it, because it contradicts our "American Creed" promising liberty and justice for all. Second, it is not another polemic, but a persuasive, well documented and argued piece of work with conclusions that follow logically from the evidence and recommendations that are based upon those conclusions. It is solid

¹ William Julius Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

social science.

According to Wilson, historical racism has contributed to the present predicament of the "underclass" who have been abandoned in the ghettos by their black middle class counterparts and a stable working class. He also asserts that contemporary racism is no longer a major factor contributing to that predicament and that affirmative action policies have been counterproductive.² The solution proposed is policy that would promote economic growth and sustained full employment. Such a policy would benefit the underclass disproportionately. In Wilson's words,

. . . , those who argue that the deteriorating economic plight of the truly disadvantaged minorities can be satisfactorily addressed simply by confronting the problem of current racial bias fail to recognize how the fate of these minorities is inextricably connected with the structure and function of the modern American economy.³

Mr. Wilson's idea is not a new one. It is distressing similar to that articulated by an African American leader a century earlier:

The wisest of my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

in an opera house.⁴

That, of course, is from the well known address that Booker T. Washington delivered to a mixed audience at the Atlanta Exposition of 1895. It is the instance in which he has been accused of trading away civil rights for potential economic opportunity.

The strongest criticism of that thinking came from W. E. B. DuBois who pointed to the contradiction it contained. Washington's compromise could only bring disfranchisement, de jure civil inferiority, and "withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro."⁵ He pointed to the paradoxes inherent in calling for black artisans while denying an opportunity to defend the right to compete, self respect in the face of civil inferiority, and vocational training in the absence of a commitment to a higher education of the teachers on whom that training must depend.⁶ DuBois was pointing to the need to reorder priorities. His ordering of those priorities is as necessary and valid today as it was when he articulated it.

Whereas Wilson does not disregard racism as a factor to be considered in explaining the social pathology that he says characterizes the "underclass," he puts it in a perspective that I find difficult to accept.

. . . to suggest that the recent rise of social dislo-

⁴ Booker T. Washington, Up from Slavery (New York: Bantam, 1901), pp. 157-58.

⁵ W. E. B. DuBois, Souls of Black Folk (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1961, pp. 48-49.

⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

cation among the ghetto underclass is due mainly to contemporary racism, which in this context refers to the "conscious refusal of whites to accept blacks as equal human beings and their willful, systematic effort to deny blacks equal opportunity," is to ignore a set of complex issues that are difficult to explain with a race-specific thesis.⁷

Wilson's position on the relative unimportance of race is not one with which I can agree. He may be right in relegating most overt racism to the past. What he fails to recognize, however, is that the good ol' boys have been replaced by a new breed, a breed that David O. Sears calls the "symbolic racists,"⁸ a more elusive foe than the bigots who stood in the open and held their ground.

This leads us back to the anecdote with which I started: the sub rosa perception that racial minorities have been partaking of more than their fair share of social opportunity. That notion is indicative of the invisible rationale that Sears tells us underlies the resistance to social equity that persists in the United States.

What Sears is talking about can be related to the classical study reported by Gunnar Myrdal in his American Dilemma in the early 1940s. In addressing "the Negro problem in the United States" Myrdal refers to a fundamental morality that lies buried in the psyche of all Americans. According to Myrdal,

The moral struggle goes on within people and not only between them. As people's valuations are conflicting, behavior normally becomes a moral compromise. There are no homogeneous "attitudes" behind human behavior but a mesh of struggling inclinations, interests, and ideals,

⁷ Wilson, pp. 10-11.

⁸ David O. Sears, "Symbolic Racism," in Eliminating Racism, by Phyllis A. Katz and Delmar A. Taylor (New York: Plenum Press, 1988).

some held conscious and some suppressed for long intervals but all active in bending behavior in their direction.⁹

He goes on to speak of the way valuations are shared within a culture and illustrates his point by telling us that even the most uneducated white ". . . in The Deep South who is violently prejudiced against the Negro . . . has also a whole compartment of his valuations housing the entire American Creed of liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for all."¹⁰ In order to live with that conflict, it becomes incumbent upon the individual to construct a moral defense.

It is this subscription to a common set of deeply embedded values that forms the foundation of the "symbolic racism" which Sears identifies. Those values, an elaboration on Myrdal's "Creed," find their form in the Protestant ethic and include "hard work, individualism, thrift, punctuality, sexual repression, and delay of gratification . . . "¹¹ In this instance those values are identified as justification for a moral stance that is never publicly articulated. It constitutes a defense against "laziness, seeking of favoritism and handouts, impulsivity, and so on."¹² It offers a convenient moral foil to affirmative action and other social policies promoting equity. It is particularly difficult to deal with because the agenda remains hidden. It is concealed in

⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941), p. xlviii.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sears, p. 72.

¹² Ibid.

other issues and may emerge quite unexpectedly and seemingly innocently in comments such as the one I identified earlier found in the essay dealing with the film Glory.

One of the most persuasive attacks on affirmative action that I have ever read is by Shelby Steele and it appeared in The New York Times last spring.¹³ In his article Steele says that affirmative action has been counterproductive: it has eroded black civil rights and, consequently, it has undermined self respect, and it has served as a barrier to achievement in education. Steele tells us that recent Supreme Court rulings disallowing preference based on race have, ironically, ". . . protect[ed] the constitutional rights of everyone, rather than take[n] rights away from blacks." And he adds, "Whites are now less willing to endure unfairness to themselves in order to grant special entitlements to blacks, . . ."¹⁴ His argument rests upon the assumption that equity contradicts the American Creed. To expect reasonable access to opportunity is seen as synonymous with "seeking favoritism and handouts."

Whereas Sears tells us what symbolic racism is and how it operates, he does not tell us why it is so effective. To understand this we must examine the nature of symbol itself. When I ask my college students to identify a symbol, with near unanimity they point to the United States' flag. When I ask them why that

¹³ Shelby Steele, "A Negative Vote on Affirmative Action," The New York Times Magazine, May 13, 1990, pp. 46+.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

flag is a symbol, they don't elaborate on what a symbol consists of and how it operates as we deal with meaning, they tell me what the symbol symbolizes. And to my college students the flag symbolizes the American Creed, the Protestant ethic, parenthood, and pie.

I cannot fault my students for having difficulty dealing with the nature of symbol, in part because examining symbol contradicts its function. Merleau-Ponty refers to symbol as ". . . bound in a way that the metaphor is not. Symbols have roots. Symbols plunge us into the shadowy experience of power."¹⁵ In short, symbols do not present themselves for examination; they stand as solitary sentinels of faith. They constitute form and function combined in unmediated commitment.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us with racism rationalized by wrapping it in the moral fibers of our secular faith. We end up with axioms rather than hypotheses. We find that the critical scrutiny to which ideas are subjected is qualified; it simply does not suit an examination of the question of race when that question is perceived as challenging a system that, ironically, is founded on freedom of expression.

Implications for Social Studies Teachers

There are at least two directions I could recommend we proceed in as a result of the position I have outlined here this morning. The first, and perhaps the most salient, is that when we deal with children in classrooms we ask them to be aware of the social

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Interpretation Theory (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 69.

science substance and methods which allow us to draw the conclusions that have been drawn. We can share Wilson's findings with them and we can examine the evidence he used in arriving at his conclusions. And we can ask our students to try out the method; i.e., collect the data, examine the social milieu in which they were generated, and be ready to say something about what has been found. This could be good social science and a pedagogically respectable experience in social studies. But it is not enough.

To understand our social world it is necessary to go beyond what we know. We must examine how we know. It is necessary to enable our students to look at the nature of the process by which knowledge is constructed and, in doing so, consider the motives that drive us as we make sense out of our worlds. To know that half of all African American children remain in single parent families throughout their lifetimes may be important, and to understand why Wilson is calling for an economic solution to social problems is important also. To understand the nature of the challenges to Wilson's position is equally important. To examine the nature of the process by which we construct and attach value to our worlds, however, is not merely important, it is essential if we want to understand social experience and exercise control over our contributions to that experience.

Bibliography

- DuBois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folk. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1961.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Interpretation Theory. Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.
- Myrdal, Gunnar. An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. New York: Harper & Bros., 1944.
- Sears, David O. "Symbolic Racism," Eliminating Racism by Phyllis A. Katz and Dalmas A. Taylor. New York: Plenum Press, 1988.
- Steele, Shelby. "A Negative Vote on Affirmative Action," The New York Times Magazine. May 13, 1990.
- Washington, Booker T. Up from Slavery. New York: Bantam, 1901.
- Wilson, William Julius. The Truly Disadvantaged. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.